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SUBJECT Soviet Defections

MARTIN AGRONKSY: Strobe, President Reagan says that the three recent Soviet defector incidents, to quote him, might constitute a deliberate ploy to disrupt his coming meeting with Gorbachev. Do you think Mr. Reagan's analysis is right?

STROBE TALBOT: No, I don't, Martin. Like in a lot of other things that President Reagan has said in the past week or so on Soviet-American relations and what the Soviets are up to, I found this statement to be off the wall. I think all the evidence is that there is no connection between the incident involving the Soviet soldier in Afghanistan, this rather tragic Soviet Huckleberry Finn character down in the Mississippi, and the redefection of Mr. Yurchenko back to the Soviet Union.

I do, however, think that it's possible that Mr. Yurchenko was part of some kind of an elaborate ploy to get egg on Uncle Sam's face. And that may have been a very phony redefection. He may have been planted here in the United States with the mission of going back from the very beginning.

AGRONKSY: Could be.

Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH DREW: Well, I agree with Strobe. It's very hard to put those three incidents together and find a pattern. I don't think the Soviets are that clever. They may be pretty good at public relations, but that's stretching things a bit far.

But there is no question that Mr. Yurchenko -- Strobe's the only one who knows how to pronounce it around here -- was a terrible embarrassment for the Administration, whatever the

story. Whether he was planted or he wasn't planted, they did end up with a substantial amount of egg on their face. And so they're fumbling around for ways to try to explain it away.

AGRONSKY: How about you?

CARL ROWAN: I don't think we can link all these things together. But we do know that they'd love to show America to be weak and this Administration to be weak. And one of the things that bothers me is this consistent pattern of fawning: Let me talk to the Soviets on radio. Please don't jam us. Let me talk on TV. Get that guy back on the boat so we don't have an incident before the summit.

We do not look too good in the whole panorama of all this nonsense that's gone on the last few days.

AGRONSKY: Jack?

JAMES J. KILPATRICK: I'm going to make it unanimous, Martin. I don't see any conspiracy here. I think there've been two bad fumbles: the one involving Yurchenko and the one down on the Mississippi. But to say that they're all tied together is like saying the Soviets shot down the Korean airliner in order to kill a Georgia Congressman. It just doesn't make sense.

AGRONSKY: Well, I'm with all of you. And let's examine the whole business of Yurchenko in a minute.

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AGRONSKY: Strobe, goodness knows the President has access to information that none of us do. And that perhaps induced him to make that observation linking it all together as a ploy. But I would agree that logic indicates that it really couldn't have been that way.

But take Yurchenko himself, a KGB colonel, supposedly came here with terribly interesting information, built up as one of the most important defectors that we've ever had. A turnabout now.

How do you think the CIA handled this whole thing? I thought it was an unbelievable, miserable mess. How do you feel about it?

TALBOTT: Abysmally. And people in the intelligence community are pretty much admitting that.

Nobody seems to have any idea what this guy was really all about. And I would wager that however much secret

information the President has access to, he doesn't know. Bill Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, doesn't know. And no theory makes a hundred percent sense.

My own feeling is that the theory that makes the most sense is that he was a plant from the beginning. He was sent over here with the assignment to take the CIA in, make them think that he was a defector, make them think he was giving them a lot of good stuff, and then do exactly what he did, to go back in a sensationalistic fashion.

KILPATRICK: If so, how could they have planned his escape from the French restaurant in Georgetown, or whatever?

TALBOTT: Well, they knew enough about how defectors are handled to know that there would probably be an opportunity.

Now, of course, you know, the biggest argument that's used against the theory that I just espoused is that it was a very high price for the Soviets to pay. They let this guy come into our hands. We shake him and rattle him and hold him up to the light and get some secret information out of him.

AGRONSKY: Do we?

TALBOTT: Well, that's the question. How good was the information?

AGRONSKY: Well, the President [confusion of voices] we didn't learn anything from him that we didn't know already.

ROWAN: Now, this is one of the things that bothers me the most about this thing. When they got this guy, they held him up as one of the great intelligence coups of all time. And then, once he gets away, the President says he was small potatoes.

KILPATRICK: Chickenfeed, was his word.

ROWAN: The CIA didn't learn anything it didn't know already.

This raises a lot of kinds of questions. To what extent does the CIA do a snow job on all of us in a case like this? To what extent do they do a snow job on the President himself? I mean either they are wrong or the President is wrong. Now, how do we get there?

DREW: Let's take the other possibility, that he was not a plant. In that case, it was also handled abysmally, as Strobe said, because there are very serious crises that defectors appear to go through. And this man apparently was not -- that was not

taken into consideration. They wonder about should they have done this, and their families back home, or their girlfriends, as the case may be.

Also, the CIA, I thought rather strangely, and obviously it backfired, was crowing about the information he gave out. Some people feel, in the intelligence community, that are very concerned about how it was handled, that this was part of his redefection, if he defected in the first place, that this fed in to both his alleged love life, but his also his concerns about the family back home.

I think maybe the wisest thing that was said about this all week was by Mark Russell, the comedian, who makes more sense than most people around here. He said as a result of this, the FBI sent its lie defectors back to Radio Shack.

TALBOTT: The problem with the redefection theory, though -- and as I said earlier, every problem has got a problem. The problem with that is that the man's committing suicide. If he really did have second thoughts and decided that he made a terrible mistake to have defected in the first place and he was going to throw himself on the mercy of his countrymen, I mean this is a guy who spent his whole career in the KGB. He knows what's going to happen to him. He's a dead man.

And in this extraordinary one-hour press conference he put on the Soviet Embassy the other day, he did not act like a man who was knowingly committing suicide.

KILPATRICK: The Administration's reaction that this is chickenfeed, that's as old as the fable of the fox and the sour grapes, and this happens all the time.

But let me tell you -- Carl said what bothers him most. Let me tell you what bothers me most this week about the CIA. And that was Bob Woodward's story last Sunday in the Washington Post in which he disclosed the CIA plot, if you please, to undermine and overthrow the government of Qaddafi in Libya.

AGRONSKY: Libya.

KILPATRICK: This is the second or third story Woodward has had in recent months backed up by quotations from documents. There is a leak somewhere that is the size of a water main either in the CIA or up on the Hill, and it's going directly to Woodward.

I think that is more serious than the whole business of Yurchenko.

AGRONSKY: Let me raise another serious aspect of it,

Jack, a First Amendment concern that I know would matter to you.

KILPATRICK: That's a tough one.

AGRONSKY: Well, it is a tough one. But let's raise it this way: If this indeed were to jeopardize American security in relation to what we plan to do in Libya, should The Post have published it?

KILPATRICK: I wouldn't have published it without first talking with Casey or with McFarlane or with top people and found -- you know, tried to make it an informed judgment on whether you were jeopardizing national security by running the story.

TALBOTT: But you know perfectly well what they would have said to you.

KILPATRICK: Well, sure. They would have said don't run it. But you at least would have talked with them and tried to let them know that you had the story.

ROWAN: I don't see any great harm done in the publishing in that story because everybody has known for months and months and years we'd like to get rid of Qaddafi.

KILPATRICK: Yeah, but here were specific quotes from specific documents, Carl.

ROWAN: That's all right. Everybody knows the U.S. is trying to wipe out Qaddafi. And so are a lot of Africans trying to wipe out Qaddafi.

AGRONSKY: Well, let's take another one.

KILPATRICK: Why not?

AGRONSKY: Let me take another dimension of this that is not entirely analogous to the point that Carl makes, and that is the way the New York Times withheld publication on details of the Bay of Pigs.

KILPATRICK: Right, and regretted it.

AGRONSKY: Which went sour, and regretted it in retrospect.

KILPATRICK: Well, we ought to print the news. We ought not to silence it.

TALBOTT: One of the startling things about the Qaddafi story was the way the Administration chose to give credibility

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and dignity to the story by making such a big public stink over it, by saying, "We're going to have a big investigation to find out who the source is."

DREW: While not admitting that it may be true.

[End of segment]